

villages, which leaves them with no livestock and drastically curtails their livelihood.¹⁸

As is always the case with Brill's Tibetan Studies Library series, the layout and the presentation of this book which includes an index, 9 figures and 11 photographs are of a high standard.

***Through the Eye of Time – Photographs of Arunachal Pradesh 1859-2006*: by Michael Aram Tarr and Stuart Blackburn. coll. Tribal Cultures in the Eastern Himalayas , vol. 1. Leiden/Boston: Brill. (Brill's Tibetan Studies Library Volume 16/1). 2008. 217 pages, 220 pictures, 2 maps. ISBN 978-90-04-16522-9.**

Reviewed by Marion Wettstein, University of Zurich

The region today referred to as Northeast-India has since British-colonial times fascinated anthropologists. Among the areas most researched were the Naga Hills and what is today the Indian Union state of Arunachal Pradesh. After Indian Independence these areas have become largely inaccessible, though never forgotten. Since a few years they are partly open to visitors and researchers again and the recent flow of publications shows that this corner of India has not lost its importance for anthropology. Unlike in the 1920s and 30s, today the medium of photography rather than writing seems to be the means to portrait and present the region. Many of the publications on Northeast India of the last years – scientific or popular – are photo-books emphasizing contemporary pictures.

The work of Michael Tarr and Stuart Blackburn, which was realized in the context of the Tribal Transitions project (2002- 2007), gives a new viewpoint to the corpus of photographic publications on Northeast India. The authors have collected the earliest photographs known from

¹⁸ On these policies implemented since 1999 – fencing off pastureland, resettlement and livestock limitation affecting Tibetan herders which are presented as a necessary response to an environmental crisis of pasture degradation and overgrazing, see among others Human Rights Watch, 2007, 19 (8) “No One Has the Liberty to Refuse”. Tibetan Herders Forcibly Relocated in Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, and the Tibet Autonomous Region; Zukosky Michael L. 2007. Making pastoral settlement visible in China. *Nomadic Peoples*, 11 (2). pp.107-133. Robin, Françoise. 2009. “Les nouveaux villages socialistes’ en Région Autonome du Tibet: remodeler le paysage rural, contrôler les populations”. *Perspectives Chinoises* (3). Hong Kong. pp.60-69.

Arunachal Pradesh and its inhabitants and followed the visual representations through time, completed by contemporary ethnographic views by Michael Aram Tarr. Historical and contemporary photographs have an equal share and stand where ever possible in relation or in completion to each other. After a short introduction by Stuart Blackburn the main part of the book follows, namely the plates, which make out nearly 200 pages. Historical photographs are commented by the original captions of the photographers whenever known and by additional short explanations by the authors. The contemporary photographs are commented by the photographer Michael Aram Tarr himself.

The aim of the book is to compare, by the means of photographs, historical periods, change and continuity in a “corner of the world tucked away between Assam, Tibet, Bhutan, and Burma” (p. 1), little known to neither an anthropological, scientific audience, nor to an interested general audience. In the genre of “ethnological” photo-books, introductions to the “land and people” and to their customs are still commonplace today. But Stuart Blackburn’s introduction is different. He is mainly interested in embedding the photographs in the context of their time, especially focusing on the photographers as persons, their function in the colonial setting, and their motivations. And with this focus – and not only by the introduction, but also by Michael Aram Tarr’s own photographs, his choice of the historical photographs, their captions and layout – the book clearly distances itself successfully from the coffee-table books and photo books published en masse about “foreign cultures”. Such books are usually structured in chapters with short in-between introductions to each chapter focusing on different features of the “life of the XY-people”. The structure of Blackburn’s and Tarr’s book, however, more resembles the genre of a photographers-book: a short introduction speaks about the photographer and his work, after which the plates follow as a corpus.

In his introduction, Blackburn remarks that even if in the beginning of colonial contacts the camera did indeed follow the gun, the camera soon started to capture the complexity of colonial context rather than solely supporting its aims. Here he relativizes a dominant discourse on photography in India (and elsewhere), which tends to focus on photography as an instrument of colonial dominance. Blackburn starts his portrait of photographers with the 19th century surgeon Sir Benjamin Simpson, who had captured many of the early studio-portraits of the Arunachal hill peoples. Following the theory of the time, these portraits were aimed at classifying people and were often staged with attributes and ornaments considered characteristic of a certain ethnic group. The purpose of the photographs was large photo exhibitions in India and Britain. The Tribal Transitions project, too, was designed with the same

intention in cooperation with the British Museum where the photographs of the project are currently exhibited together with ethnographic objects (Between Tibet and Assam: cultural diversity in the eastern Himalayas, British Museum, 23 October 2008 – 19 April 2009). But the debut-exhibitions were held in Northeast India itself and one of the overall aims of the book and the whole project – so is the authors' hope – is that through the photographs "the people of Arunachal Pradesh are gaining new perspectives on the past 150 years of their history" (p. 19). That photographs indeed, as stated by the authors, are locally used in today's constructions of and debates about tradition I could witness myself in neighbouring Nagaland.

After the first contact with the hill tribes the British colonial administration started expeditions to the hills of Arunachal in the early 20th century. Also for this historical period the photographers are introduced in detail. A few chosen pictures are commented by diary entries of the photographers themselves and short stories surrounding them. By these short descriptions, we can but guess how much in depth context a single photograph can potentially concentrate on itself. The detailed contextualisation of each and every photograph in the book – let alone of the total of all collections gathered in the Tribal Transitions project given as nearly 8000 photographs – would fill hundreds of pages. In this part of the introduction one can estimate the decision of the author: Does he attempt to introduce the "photography of Arunachal Pradesh" as a whole, as a corpus, or should he choose some single examples to illustrate the potential of "a photograph of the Arunachal Pradesh"? Already Roland Barthes complained about the mere impossibility to describe "photography" as such, its essence, and decided, that the only possibility to describe and analyse photography is by the single chosen picture (Barthes 1980). Blackburn obviously came to a similar conclusion and so the spectator of the more than 200 photographs is left with just about enough information to trigger his interest to start his own investigations.

With the difficulty of describing photography as such in mind it is not amazing that, as Blackburn remarks, not much is known about the role of photography in Northeast India in the middle of the 20th century despite the huge collections that were produced especially in the 1940s and 50s (p. 13) by scholars like Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, C.R. Stonor, Ursula Betts (Graham-Bower), or Verrier Elwin. He observes that compared to the preceding decades, the photographers stayed much longer in the region and thus were able to visualize processes lasting over days or even weeks, for example rituals. This is surely a result of the new style of anthropology during the first half of the 20th century: the ideal of long participant observation emphasized by Malinowski whose lectures Haimendorf for

example had attended (Macfarlane and Turin 1996). The new photographic technology of the 35mm camera with short shutter speed made it possible to freeze people in motion and the telephoto lens enabled close-up views of emotional faces without the photographed necessarily noticing it. This technical precondition soon would determine the aesthetic style of the photography in the time, as can be seen explicitly in the photographs of Fürer-Haimendorf or Elwin. All photographers of mid-20th century share another feature in common: most of them (Elwin is an exception) had spent long time in the Naga Hills and had started their photographic endeavour there. One could say that the Naga Hills had been the visual pathfinder for Arunachal Pradesh.

The plates make out the bigger part of the book. They are structured along ethnic groups of the area, which, in the order of their appearance, are the Adi (specially mentioned are the Gallong, Abor Adi, Palibo and Tangam), the Idu Mishmi, the Digaro and Miju Mishmi, the Khamti, the Singpho, the Wancho, the Hill Miri, the Apatani, the Nyishi (and Dafla), the Aka, the Miji and Bugun and the Monpa (specially mentioned are the Sherdukpen). The Apatani make out the largest part, placed in the last third of the book with 37 pages containing 43 photographs. A similar volume of pictures we find for the Adi at the beginning of the book with 28 pages containing 30 photographs and the Monpa at the end of the book with 25 pages containing 30 photographs. Only very few pictures can be found for the Singpho, the Aka, the Wancho and the Miji and Bugun, who are covered with two to eight pictures each only. The Idu Mishmi, Digaro, Khamti, Hill Miri and Nyishi are presented with an average of twelve to 18 pictures each. If we compare the order of ethnic groups with the maps given on p. 2 we realize that it roughly follows the three cultural zones shortly mentioned in the introduction: It groups together the people around the Subansiri, Siyom, Siang and Dibang rivers (zone 2), the people of Tirap and around the Lohit river (zone 3) and the people around the Kameng river (zone 1). Unfortunately neither the table of contents nor a clear signalling of “chapters” indicates this overall structure, which makes orientation in the plates a little complicated. Besides the ethnic groups, the assembling of narrative strings is a second element of structuring the plates. Always within the framework of the tribal groups, stories are told as often as possible by the sequence of pictures. Most obvious they are when festivals or rituals are documented, but also other sequences are arranged as narratives, like the murder of Noel Williams and its consequences or the raid on the Nyishi village Kirum. The rhetoric of the photograph gets its content through this embedding into the narrative structure and by it operates as part of an argumentation line.

The photographs selected for the book are mainly single or group portraits and ritual processes. Very seldom one encounters landscapes or

architecture, scenes of everyday life in agriculture and household or crafts. So the focus is on people and the way they look. Many portraits show smiling faces and underline the dignity and natural self-esteem of the subject. In many of the pictures one can feel the respect of the photographers, historical or contemporary, for the hill tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. In this context one can of course agree with Solomon-Godeau that photographs (and their published compilations) serve the ratification of a complex ideological setting, which in a certain historical moment is perceived as reality (2003: 59). In the case of Blackburn's and Tarr's book we can identify one of these anthropological ideologies of our time as what I would call the understood perception of "the other" on eye-level and with high esteem as a prerequisite.

For the presentation of the photographs of each ethnic group, two approaches can be made out: Either the plates start with the oldest photograph and move on chronologically in time – this proceeding is usually used when only a few pictures of the specific group are available –, or they start with the oldest one or two photographs and further on juxtapose photographs of the middle of the 20th century with contemporary ones. The juxtapositions show that changes have occurred especially in ornaments and clothing. In the choice of plates of Blackburn's and Tarr's book there is actually only one pair of photographs, which shows nearly identical dress and ornament today (2005) and 60 years ago: The attire of the Apatani priest during the Murung festival (pp. 144-145). As the authors also state the rituals and festivals have changed but little. On the series taken by Michael Aram Tarr in the last years we see many people in "modern" trousers and jumpers, most of them engaged in some animal offering, sports game or other ritual. This stands in sharp contrast to the situation in the neighbouring Naga Hills today, where the ritual context has been lost largely and dress and ornament being displayed at tourist events have seen standardization on the one hand and elaboration towards modern dress cut on the other. Compared to the Naga Hills, my own research region, it seems indeed that Arunachal has not changed as sharply. In the photographs we do not encounter any urban settings; tin roofs and concrete walls seem only to start to replace wood and thatch in architecture; and missionaries seem not to have invaded the country (as yet).

Beside ethnographic and historical diversity, a main criterion in the choice of photographs in the book – according to the authors – is aesthetics (p. 1). The authors do not specify what defines aesthetics in their eyes, but in looking at the photographs intensely, one is pleased once more by the fact, that they free themselves from certain visual conventions. Blurred, damaged or spotted historical images are not ruled out and many of the contemporary photographs show a very specific

colour spectrum. One is tempted to judge that they are just badly printed. Most of them have a strong yellow shade and the magenta is often exaggerated. An extreme example is the picture of a mithun offering (p. 84), where the blood of the meat is as pink as the waistcoats of the sacrificers. Whether the colour balance is due to the printing or indeed intended by the photographer, the effect is an interesting one in any case: It gives the very recent photographs the air of time. They feel “old”. Without reading the captions, one might easily be misled to date them somewhere in the 1970s. By this aesthetic, which is noticeable throughout most of Michael Aram Tarr’s colour photographs in the book, they decidedly distance themselves from the high-sharp, glossy photographs of today’s ordinary coffee-table books and don’t run the risk to be mistaken for this category. The play with time is also visible in the few black and white photographs by Michael Aram Tarr. At first sight they blend in perfectly with the historical black and white pictures and if one doesn’t pay attention to the dating in the caption, one can easily mistake them for “historical” photographs. In the context of documentary photographs it seems a visual convention to perceive black and white photographs as “old”, while colour photographs suggest modernity, present or at least recent past. Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf, already among the Naga in the 1930s, experimented with the just invented colour film for 35mm cameras (Oppitz et al. 2008: Frontispiece). It would not astonish if he and his colleagues would also have done so in Arunachal a decade later. However, in the book all of the photographs of the 1940s and 1950s are black and white. A further element which distinguishes the book from other ethno-documentary photo-books is its layout. As a rule, there is one photograph shown at each page with original captions and a short comment by the authors. From time to time longer series of events are shown – usually rituals or festivals – which are often denser in pictures, three to four on a double page. Very seldom we find a seamless picture and the framing white borders add style and dignity to the photographs.

In the publisher’s announcement this book is described as a “visual history of Arunachal Pradesh”. I would agree and add that visual histories in the form of photo-books with little written text are rather rare in anthropology. Even though visual anthropology as a discipline is now over a decade old, and despite the fact that drawings and photographs have been an important part of scientific argumentation in anthropology since the 19th century, the methods of producing (rather than analyzing) visual books as scientific publications are still in an experimental phase and are not yet fully acknowledged by the scientific community. Stuart Blackburn and Michael Aram Tarr have herewith given a good guideline for the substance, structure and style of an anthropological visual history book.

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***Himalayan Tribal Tales. Oral Tradition and Culture in the Apatani Valley.* by Stuart Blackburn. coll. Tribal Cultures in the Eastern Himalayas, vol. 2. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2008.
xviii + 298 p. ISBN 978 90 04 17133 6**

reviewed by Pascal Bouchery, University of Poitiers

It is a pleasure to note the recent appearance of several in-depth studies of oral literature of societies in Arunachal Pradesh, at a time when many of them, along with the languages from which they emanate, appear to be on the decline. Following Verrier Elwin's pioneering works in this field (*Myths of the North-East Frontier of India*, 1958; *A New Book of Tribal Fiction*, 1970) and subsequent attempts to cover more or less all ethnic groups of the State, such as *Folk songs of Arunachal Pradesh* (Pandey, 1997) or *Myths and beliefs on creation of universe among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh* (Duarah, 1999), the current research trend appears to focus more on extensive studies relating to specific ethnic groups. O. Tayeng published a *Folk Tales of the Adis* in 2003, followed by a voluminous *Mishmi Folk Tales of Lohit Valley* (2007). It is now the Apatanis' turn to unveil their rich oral literature to a larger audience, as written about by the folklorist S. Blackburn.

Hemmed in by the mountains of Arunachal Pradesh, the tiny Apatani valley and its seven villages attracted a lot of attention from the first

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